LIFESTYLE MEDIA IN ASIA

Across Asia, consumer culture is increasingly shaping everyday life, with neoliberal economic and social policies being adopted by more and more governments who have come to see their citizens as individualized, sovereign consumers with choices about their lifestyles and identities. One aspect of this development is the emergence of new wealthy middle classes with lifestyle aspirations shaped by national, regional and global media – especially by a range of new popular lifestyle media, which include magazines, television, and mobile and social media. This book explores how everyday conceptions and experiences of identity are being transformed by media cultures across the region. It considers a range of different media across various Asian contexts, reflecting on how the shaping of lifestyles in Asia differs from similar processes in Western countries, and assessing how the new lifestyle media not only represent an emergent media culture, but also illustrate wider cultural and social changes in the Asian region.

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LIFESTYLE MEDIA IN ASIA
Consumption, aspiration and identity

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6 Empresses in the Palace and the “neoliberalization through China” project in Taiwan

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The phenomenon of the Chinese historical television drama *Empresses in the Palace* (Houngong Zhen Huan Zhan) in Taiwan can be best captured through Henry Jenkins’s notion of “convergence culture,” defined as “the flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behavior of media audiences who will go almost anywhere in search of the kinds of entertainment experiences they want” (Jenkins 2006, 2). Not only has the show been repeated more than ten times in three years since 2012 and, at its peak, aired for nine hours a week on TV (XMTVCN 2012) and been streamed on the Internet for free, but it has also proliferated into different genres, including variety shows, *kuso* (satirical remakes of the show by viewers), and self-help books, in addition to generating numerous commentaries and news coverage on different media platforms.

Convergence culture is predicated on a network society whose operation of power in shaping subjectivity can be illuminated through Foucault’s concept of governmentality (Hay 2010). Scholarship in the West has taken up the Foucaultian lens of governmentality to focus on the production of neoliberal subjectivity (Gill 2003; Hay 2010; McRobbie 2013). If Western scholars have the privilege of taking “neoliberalism” as a body of thought originating, revised and practiced in the West, then in a peripheral location such as Taiwan, a “state without nation” with a democratically elected authoritarian government since 2008, we must address how the process of neoliberalization is a process of articulation and translation (Clarke 2008) which involves struggles and negotiations not only with the American and Chinese empires, but also with the resilient authoritarian culture from the old and now revived KMT (Kuomintang or Nationalist) regime, which ruled Taiwan at the time of writing (2008–2016).

This chapter focuses on the production of a particular kind of authoritarian neoliberal subjectivity that I argue is produced via the convergence of different media platforms and genres generated through *Empresses in the Palace*, a Chinese TV drama, in the context of Taiwan having taken on a project that I call “neoliberalization through China” since 2008. The chapter first discusses the concept of neoliberal governmentality in producing subjectivity in a network society, followed by a discussion of the project of neoliberalization through China in Taiwan. The third part discusses the political rationalities inscribed in the institution of the everyday networks of government and the TV industry, which have led to a re-privileging of traditional Chinese culture. Finally, I analyze the flow of *Empresses* texts, from television to the Internet and the business self-help genre, in order to address the authoritarian neoliberal subjectivity that is produced. I argue that neoliberal thought (especially the economization of culture) as a form of political rationality informs the making of the creative industries, including television. This neoliberal thought articulates with the KMT’s authoritarian philosophy as well as with Communist China’s political strategy in using traditional Chinese culture as an economic resource to unify with Taiwan. The economization of traditional Chinese culture, demonstrated through the television culture generated by *Empresses in the Palace*, works to produce authoritarian neoliberal subjects who are selfish, calculating, self-responsible, and obedient to power and hierarchy—a project that undermines the social and leads to pressing political dangers.

Neoliberal governmentality in Taiwan

For the governmentality school of thought, neoliberalism is defined through “rule at a distance” which emphasizes self-discipline and self-cultivation in producing autonomous, calculating, entrepreneurial citizenship. This is achieved through the circulation of discourses and technologies in different levels and contexts. As such, media plays a significant role in disseminating discourses. As Hay points out, the institution of liberal government requires the multiplication and dispersion of mechanisms for disciplining, guiding and shaping individuals’ proper exercise of freedoms. The proliferation of mechanisms constitutes the networks of power which, in a digitally structured network society, enable power to operate as the “little everyday operation of social control” (Hay 2010, 154). Television, the Internet and self-help books, in a convergence society, are such mechanisms of the “everyday network of government” (Hay 2010).

Hay emphasizes the notion of governo-“mentalities” – the political rationalities that operate at different levels and contexts, but synchronize with each other to produce autonomous, free, self-enterprising citizens. Since the KMT took over Taiwan (in the late 1940s), a form of Confucian-influenced governmentality (“cultivate oneself, keep one’s family in order, run the country well, bring peace to the world”) also relied on “rule at a distance” to produce obedient, productive, patriotic, self-reliant and self-responsible citizens for authoritarian control. What this entails is that “rule at a distance” is not unique to neoliberalism (Kipnis 2008), and that neoliberal subjectivity and citizenship need to be seen as the articulation of rule at a distance with specific economic policies (which are informed by particular kinds of political rationalities or “mentalities”). Through neoliberal globalization, today, US-style neoliberal articulates with Taiwan’s unique authoritarian development, and since 2008, with Taiwan’s neoliberalization
through China project. In the next section, I discuss the political rationalities that enable Taiwan’s television industry to become an “everyday network of government” — that is, the historical and geographical “arrangement” of the networks and dispositions through which technologies of control and freedom are exercised (Hay 2010), within the context of “neoliberalization through China.”

Neoliberalization through China

A brief account of the history of Taiwan is needed in order to delineate the particular type of political-economic formation that led to the revival of the KMT authoritarian regime and its project of neoliberalization through China. Before economic liberalization and democratization (in the late 1980s and 1990s), Taiwan’s economy was structured according to two logics. On the one hand, an export-oriented economic development policy designed and supported by the USA drew Taiwan into the international division of labor, spawning small and medium-sized family firms, which formed the backbone of Taiwan’s “economic miracle.” On the other hand, all major industries, including those left behind by the colonial Japanese state (1895-1945), were either controlled and owned by the KMT party-state, or structured according to patron-client dependency relationships between the party-state and the capitalists who conformed to the demands of the state (this was the case with the television industry). Since 1985, with the signing of the Plaza Accord, East Asian countries have effectively been forced to begin a process of market liberalization according to US demands (Hamilton 1999, 56-57). In Taiwan, this led to the privatization of public assets into the hands of the KMT party and the capitalists who had close connections with them. At the same time, democratic movements began to gain popular support, demanding elections at both central and local government levels. The need for election funding opened up business’s influence over the political agenda (Kim and Im 2001; Kong 2004). Not only did this “dual transition” (economic and political) shape a business-friendly Taiwanese state, but the legacy of the KMT party-state’s practice of crony capitalism also led to the formation of KMT-friendly large corporations whose performance became the measure of Taiwan’s economic success.

What the neoliberalists understand is that they need to control the state so that the market can be regulated to the advantage of the few. The KMT’s loss of political power from 2000 to 2008 (following the party’s losses to the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) in the 2000 and 2004 presidential elections) led it to cooperate with its historical enemy, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) across the straits in China. The Lian-Hu Meeting (Lian Hu Gonghu) between the chairmen of the KMT and CCP in 2005 marked an official policy change for both the KMT and the CCP. For the CCP, the agenda is now unification through economic integration, which requires the KMT’s power for “institution building” (Xin 2010). For the KMT, “uniting

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with the CCP to fight against Taiwan’s independence (and the DPP’s “tian gong zhi taidu”) became the political strategy.

The election of KMT president Ma Ying-Jeou in 2008 marked the success of this cooperation. Following his election there occurred a process of “neoliberalization through China” according to China’s demands for institution building. Neoliberalization through China refers to the KMT’s attempt to see Taiwan join the world economic order through China, as the Ma administration believes Taiwan can leverage the rise of China, while China disallows Taiwan to join any trade pact with countries other than China (or only with the permission of China). The signing of the Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement (ECFA) in 2010, the expansion of the free trade agreement with China, and the controversial Cross Strait Service Trade Agreement in 2014 are touted as the only and necessary path to Taiwan’s full participation in world trade (such as Taiwan’s signing on to the Trans-Pacific Partnership).

Neoliberalization through China drew Taiwan firmly into China’s economic orbit, making Taiwan an integral part of the Chinese economy, resulting in the formation of a class of pro-China, pro-KMT cross-strait elite capitalists (两岸投资者资本家), and producing an increasing gap between the rich and the poor, with the top 5 percent of the rich earning 65.97 times more than the lowest 5 percent of the working poor in 2008, and 96.56 times in 2011 (Zheng 2013).

This “neoliberalization through China” economic policy also worked politically for the revival of the KMT’s authoritarian rule. Diehl (2012) points out that the Chinese “model” or, more accurately, paradigm, itself took inspiration from East Asian authoritarian countries such as Singapore and Taiwan, and relied on investments and technology from these countries in developing “socialism with Chinese characteristics” — that is, the beginnings of economic reform in the late 1970s and 1980s. At the same time, China’s state-managed economy has also been nourished by globalization, and the Chinese regime has been a major proponent of the globalization of markets and production since the 1990s. “What characterizes the Chinese economy is a successful combination of authoritarian management internally with effective activity in the neoliberal market” (Diehl 2012, 285). Cooperating with China, for Taiwan’s revived authoritarian administration under Ma Ying-jeou, entailed exercising unchecked political power in following China’s demand for institution building. The Chinese model’s combination of authoritarianism with neoliberal globalization allowed Ma to violate democratic procedures guaranteed in Taiwan’s constitution in the name of “striving for the economy” while nourishing pro-China and pro-KMT capitalists.

The economization of culture and TV as an everyday network of government

How has culture, in particular television-generated culture, figured since 2008, and what role does it play in this political-economic arrangement of
“neoliberalization through China” in Taiwan? A brief discussion of the history of television more broadly is necessary to understand the present configuration of TV as an everyday network of government in producing “neoliberal subjects with Chinese characteristics.”

In Taiwan, television was installed as an instrument for governing the population on a daily basis in the context of both the Cold War and China’s civil war of the 1940s (between China’s Communist forces and the Nationalist/KMT Republic of China). The goal of the three TV networks, established between 1962 and 1971, was to “correct social consciousness, maintain national interests, and national dignity”; “adhere to government policies and promote anti-communism ideologies”; and emphasize “traditional ethics [Chinese culture and tradition] and morality and maintain free democracy.” In addition to “using Mandarin as the primary language” (Su 1991, 125). The mission of governing Chinese national subjects in the Republic of China on Taiwan was supported by a particular kind of industrial arrangement: a “patron-client dependency” between state officials and capitalists who pledged loyalty to the KMT state (Lin 2006). However, this arrangement also led to inherent tensions between the government’s need to use TV as a propaganda tool, and the capitalists’ need to earn a profit (Lin 2006).

Following the end of the authoritarian rule of the Chiang family (successive presidents Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek and his son, Chiang Ching-kuo) and the lifting of martial law, the entanglement of democratization with neoliberalization in the late 1980s led to the deregulation of television and the formation of a “post-network” era dominated by commercial cable and satellite systems in the early 1990s, and later, the formation of a network society powered by the digital revolution, characterized by the convergence of TV and other media platforms. This period of industrial and technological reform was facilitated by the myth that a free market equals freedom of speech, which was supported not only by the industrialists but also by the popular demand for democracy. These changes, however, have not altered TV’s role as an everyday network of government, but have strengthened it, as TV is now further woven into the texture of everyday life not only through round-the-clock broadcasting but also through click-on-demand online digital services available at anytime and place.

Neoliberalization has played a major role in maintaining the hegemony of Chinese culture in Taiwan (a cultural project that had already been central to the KMT’s rule, since the 1940s). First, the opening up of China to Taiwan in the realm of television in the late 1980s triggered “China fever” in drama productions: many producers went to China to shoot the authentic China (as opposed to the imagined "motherland" of Taiwan’s previous drama productions) and take advantage of cheap Chinese labor and talent. This allowed television producers and managers (who were all high-level KMT party members) to appeal to the value of “Chineseness” to maintain their power and control as they struggled against the tide of democratization and the concurrent rise of Taiwanese nativism and localization, manifested in the

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popularity of the Hsiangtu (indigenous) drama genre. Drama productions co-produced in China were praised as an act of searching for quality and authenticity, despite uncertain financial returns. Moreover, the concept of “the China market” (Zhongguo shichuang) emerged during this period not only to underline its size and desirability, but also used interchangeably with “international” as a rhetorical strategy to devalue the “narrow-minded,” local nature of concurrent democratic demands for cultural indigenization/Taiwanization (Yang 2015).

Second, the global neoliberal discourse of “creative industries,” which sees culture as economy, began to take center stage from the 2000s. Since the election of Ma in 2008, the democratically elected authoritarian regime used this neoliberal discourse in two ways to facilitate the revival of Chinese culture and tradition, paving the way for political unification. First, the neoliberal discourse relies on the separation of the economy from the political and cultural domains and the assertion that the economization of these domains is apolitical. This is achieved through constantly invoking the deep-seated ideology of “striving for the economy” (pin jing) as the ultimate goal of politics. As Hao Min-yi, the former policy consultant for President Ma, stated in 2009: “we need to change our ideas and think of culture as a form of capital and as a technology that brings about economic development” (Hao 2009). Second, in this neoliberal discourse of culture as economic resource, pro-China Taiwanese capitalists, the Chinese state, and Chinese capitalists align construct Chinese culture and tradition as Taiwan’s niche and strength in the realm of popular culture production. As a result, the main goal of Taiwan’s cultural policy, according to the Ministry of Culture, is to develop “Chinese culture with Taiwanese characteristics” (「具有台灣特色的中華文化」的文化政策目標) (Yang 2015).

The neoliberal discourse of culture as economy has also led to the prominence of the “Chinese-language market” (zhongwen shichuang), a concept that has its roots in the global “Greater China” discourse of the 1990s, enabled by Asia Satellite TV’s globalization through regionalization strategy. In the domain of television production, two phenomena emerged as a result of the hegemony of the “Chinese-language market” discourse. First, we have seen the hollowing out of the national television industry as many producers, entertainers and investors moved to China to capitalize on its large market. As a result, most television and cable channels rely on importing dramas to fill up airtime. In 2008, domestically produced drama took up 42 percent of airtime whereas in 2011, it had decreased to 29.6 percent (Ministry of Culture 2013). The Chinese cultural nationalism promoted by the KMT state led to the boycott and hence the decline of the import of Korean dramas, to be replaced by Chinese dramas (in particular, historical dramas) as of 2012. The old networks, including CTS, now a public broadcasting channel, played a major role in this process of disseminating Chinese culture and history through Chinese historical dramas in the name of saving and earning money. Second, in reaching the Chinese-language market, Taiwan’s drama production
invested heavily in the production of a new genre, Chinese dramas (huaju), emphasizing “Confucian” ethics, including filial piety, obedience, family and romantic love (Yang 2012).

In this section, I have mapped out the governmental political rationalities in the domain of culture, and television in particular. I have argued that historically, television has functioned as an everyday network of government, but whereas in the early days of television, governmental rationality was inflicted by a contradiction between the mission to cultivate Chinese culture as the superior national culture and the search for commercial interests, the contemporary neoliberal discourse of culture as economy resolves this contradiction by viewing culture as economy, and under the pro-China, pro-unification regime, makes traditional Chinese culture and tradition a valuable economic resource for cultural production.

**Historical TV dramas, Empresses in the Palace and “elite networks”**

*Empresses in the Palace*, an historical TV drama made in China, has to be approached through three contexts. First, we must consider China’s appropriation of the global discourse of soft power to fit its nationalistic agenda. While Joseph Nye uses soft power to discuss state-to-state international relations, China’s propaganda machine appropriates it to emphasize the role of culture in both national cohesion and international competition. Building a harmonious society through traditional Chinese culture is considered to strengthen China’s soft power (Eldridge 2012). Consequently, cultural productions are obliged to promote traditional Chinese culture. Second, we must recall that it is through the rhetoric of the economy that soft power as political control can be exercised, as was stated in former Chinese President Hu Jintao’s policy announcement in 2007, and written in the guidelines for China’s cultural development passed in 2011: “We insist on developing culture industry through Chinese style … [We will] expand the scale of our culture industry, increase our competitiveness and power in the culture industry, and actively develop domestic and international cultural markets in order to strengthen the influence of Chinese culture in the world” (Xinhua.net 2007).

The politicization of the economy and the economization of politics through the revival of traditional Chinese culture have led to the commodification and proliferation of Chinese history in the popular domain (Liu 2004). Third, we should take into account that the political and economic uses of traditional Chinese culture led the state to promote historical TV dramas. The popularity of historical TV dramas, however, needs to be analyzed as both a critique and a legitimation of the present. Zhu Ying, in investigating the early historical TV drama *Yongzheng Dynasty* (1997), points out that, on the one hand, it offers a critique of the present in the guise of historical figures and events so as to avoid censorship; on the other hand, *Yongzheng Dynasty* legitimizes existing authoritarianism through “totalitarian nostalgia” which celebrates the leadership of a kind and capable emperor (Zhu 2005). Moreover, this show also led to a proliferation of Qing dynasty dramas, an historical period when China was at its peak in terms of territorial expansion and national strength. *Empresses in the Palace*, also set in the Qing dynasty’s Yongzheng period, follows this generic tradition of glorifying China’s rise and strength. At the same time, it needs to be read in relation to the present situation.

The predominant mode of interpretation considers *Empresses in the Palace* as a contemporary workplace tale presented in the form of history: “Empresses in the Palace itself is a show about contemporary ethics of the workplace, dressed in the guise of history” and “[it is] a reflection of contemporary Chinese social reality, be it in the workplace or the realm of love” (Hou 2013). As the director of *Empresses*, Zheng Xiao-long, indicates: “even though this is an historical palace drama, it is a drama that adheres to official Chinese history, you can learn real history from this show. Moreover, the back palace is the workplace, the show also helps young people to deal with their career” (Zhao 2011).

The reading of an historical drama centered on love struggles as a workplace cautionary tale needs to be analyzed through China’s gendered political-economic configuration. A brief plot summary will be provided here to illustrate this point.

Zhen Huan is forced by the emperor to be a royal concubine in the back palace, a place where women compete for power by trying to win the love of the emperor (Figure 6.1). There, she becomes embroiled in power struggles and almost loses her life several times, which transforms her from an innocent girl (Figure 6.2) into a conniving, calculating and mature woman (Figure 6.3). In order to survive, she relies on several close friends as her network in fighting her enemies. When she loses the emperor’s love, she flees the palace and stays in a monastery where she has an affair with the emperor’s brother, Lord 17, and is impregnated by him, but due to unpredictable circumstances, she comes back to the palace and becomes even more scheming and hardened in eliminating her enemies. To eliminate the queen, she abducts her own baby and claims it was the queen’s fault. She even poisons the man she loves, Lord 17, in order to gain the emperor’s trust. Finally, when the emperor dies, she is consecrated as queen (the mother of the new emperor) and enjoys a life of power and wealth.

John Osburg (2013) uses the term “elite networks” to refer to the state-business complex at the heart of China’s development of capitalism and discusses the gender politics of these elite networks. He argues that “the moral economies of elite guanshi networks are at the very heart of ‘capitalist’ development in urban China.” *Guanshi* relationships are composed of mixtures of interest, affect, and morality, a mixture that distinguishes them from other types of relationship” (ibid., 32). By and large, elite networks are a men’s world that relies on Confucian brotherhood, in particular the concept of *yiqi* (義氣) — “honor or a sense of obligation in personal relationships” — to mask the utilitarian nature of what is in fact an elite guanshi network. The men who
dominate this network rely on women (hostesses, girlfriends, and emai or mistresses) to boost their masculinity and build up fraternity. As a result, the masculine ideal in China today is the “boss-patron” who gives out material favors to support the lower-status men in his network and the women who depend on him for a living. The moral economies of guanxi networks serve to exclude outsiders and consolidates power. Excluded from the major field of power play, women rely on their youthful body and their “quality” (artistic cultivation and education) to exchange for a short- or long-term relationship with these wealthy and powerful men who can offer them material wealth. What is interesting in Osburg’s account is its illumination of the way in which the elites understand the significance of guanxi in building power, while the

women who are excluded from the elite networks use the trope of market competition to legitimize their trading of sexuality for material comfort and frame the sale of sex “as a ‘developed’ form of entrepreneurialism: as the rational exploitation of marginalized women’s only resource in a competitive economic environment” (Osburg 2013, 145–149). Women see the instrumental “capacity” of their body in building their marriage/relationships, and therefore rely on a neoliberal discourse of market competition, individualism, self-reliance and entrepreneurialism to prepare themselves as successful mistresses. Within this gendered social arrangement, the domain of love and marriage effectively becomes the workplace, for women.

Empresses in the Palace depicts the plight of women within the structure of such gendered elite networks, with the emperor representing the boss-patron. As the show emphasizes, every exchange of sex with the emperor is compensated by material gifts, while no sex means literal death from material deprivation. Love has to be sacrificed in order to maintain life and material wealth, as symbolized by the murdering of Lord 17. Moreover, women’s social status, while hierarchically structured, is determined by the emperor’s favors. As a result, the realm of love/sex is equated with the workplace and is a matter of survival for women. This structures women’s relationship with each other in the form of a friend-foe binary, with competition and elimination being the primary ethos. To compete for the emperor’s love, guanxi is seen as an essential strategy: an instrumentalized human relationship in the form of cooperation in eliminating the foe within the structure of the friend-foe imaginary. Moreover, the concept of competition requires a calculating, selfish, self-interested subject who will grab power by any possible means without any moral concerns. These constructions of the society as hierarchical and human nature as selfish and rational are essential to the working of authoritarian neoliberal Chinese capitalism.

Workplace literature and the production of authoritarian neoliberal working subjects in Taiwan

Through media convergence, Empresses in the Palace has extended into the genre of self-help books, which interpret the show as a cautionary workplace tale, with the historical huck palace likened to the modern workplace. The self-help genre of “workplace literature” is produced by fans who become experts because of their training in economics and management, or their personal experiences in the workplace. Written by both male and female Chinese and Taiwanese fan-authors, and circulated through books, business magazines and the Internet in Taiwan, along with the show’s daily, repeated appearance on television, these cultural texts constitute the “ethical substance,” “the primary material of [... ] moral conduct,” in Foucault’s words, which individuals use to cultivate subjectivity (Foucault 1990, 26). The material this section analyzes includes texts like The 80 Things that Empresses in the Palace Teaches Me (Niyun 2013), Survival Tactics in the Workplace
jungle where the weak becomes the meat of the strong. There are no judges, no clear-cut rules, and only survivors can define what success is. Zhen Huan says, "in the back palace, even if you do not want to compete, you will inevitably get involved ... better to help yourself rather than help others." Built into such a discourse of competition is an acknowledgement of the society/workplace as hierarchical. Most of the literature is directed to the "ordinary us" at the bottom of the office hierarchy: "Everybody thinks we are Zhen Huan, but most of us are An Lingrong ... Most people do not have well-established families or rich fathers to lean on ... once you enter the workplace, you have been selected as a royal concubine in the back palace, and you can only fight alone" (ibid., 16).

Within this hierarchical workplace, human relationships are structured vertically in terms of boss-employee, and horizontally in terms of the friend-foe binary. However, I want to point out that this "jungle" experienced by ordinary workers is in fact an intentional creation of management in order to maintain a workplace hierarchy that favors the "boss." In "The Six Management Philosophies in Empresses in the Palace," the author, Tan Xiao-fang, a leadership training expert, makes it clear that "cooperation is just a slogan, the most important thing is to maintain power balance in the workplace." "If everybody works hard and cooperates, the power and status of the boss might be threatened. This is why many managers [create an environment] for their subordinates to fight with each other rather than cooperate as brothers" (Tan 2012).

What needs to be highlighted is the notion of hierarchy, since it is the liberal element rather than the liberal notion of equality (Kipnis 2008) that is characteristic of Chinese capitalist development (including the East Asian authoritarian capitalist development that provided inspiration to China). The Chinese model combines this hierarchical thinking with the neoliberal notion of competition and pan-economization as its moral foundation for authoritarian neoliberal capitalist development. In addition to the neoliberal construction of the workplace as a jungle where competition is the norm, this body of literature helps to produce a neoliberal subject defined by individualism, self-responsibility, materialism (self-interest), and instrumentalism (of human relationships and the self).

The most famous phrase by Zhen Huan that has caught popular sentiment is "A bitch always takes her feelings (贱人就是婊子). What this phrase articulates is the acknowledgement of social inequality that puts us "in hell." (Luo 2013). As such, "a virtuous heart can only lead to destruction, the key is to protect yourself ... Being a bitch who fakes her feelings (贱人就是婊子) is a necessary evil ... When there are conflicts over interests, everybody sacrifices everything in order to be a bitch" (ibid., 82). The key strategy for faking one's feelings is to stay "low key" (低调). All of the workplace literature, be it for top-level managers (Tan 2012) or office workers, recommends to stay low key and "play stupid as a form of wisdom" (Wang 2013, 93). "No matter whether it's in the back palace or in the workplace, you should stay low key so that you do not make other people jealous of you. Pretend to be weak and
show this to other people, so that other people do not see you as a target and you can protect yourself” (Xiyi 2013, 71).

The “bitch mentality” that seeks self-interest above all things leads to the exomoronic common sense of responsibilization and instrumentalization of the self, and the instrumentalization of human relationships. The former presumes that the self can be instrumentalized and objectified as “capital” which can be used, as in “the basic survival rule in the back palace is that someone who is of good use” (Luo 2013, 23), and the injunction to “feel satisfied in being used, and make yourself unable all the time” (Xiyi 2013, 117). However, the objectified human is then endowed with self-responsibility, to improve competitiveness as value: “a real iron rice bowl is not about finding lifelong employment (which is impossible). It means wherever you go, you can always find rice . . . you need to improve yourself to raise your own value” (Luo 2013, 25-27). Attitude is essential to this self-responsibilization: “Zhen Huan teaches us that if we are in our own hands. As long as we can cultivate a positive attitude and seize every opportunity we encounter, we can be successful . . . There is no desperate situation in the workplace, there are only desperate attitudes” (Wang 2013, 200-202). What is promoted here is a neoliberal discourse of psychologized competition which leads to an emphasis on individual responses and responsibility in times of economic insecurity.

Gender politics also operate through this psychologized competition, not only in the form of working on the “self” as consciousness but also vis-à-vis the gendered body. Specific advice is given to women to cultivate a positive attitude in order that they can “behave like blossoms”: “Be strong willed and manage your body. People will not treat you as a human being if your body is out of shape . . .” (Jinfei and Gao 2013, 178-179). Emphasis is placed on the active cultivation of the beautiful body through proper dress code to appear “youthful and feminine”. “The first lesson of Zhen Huan teaches you is that people need proper clothing . . . Use this as an investment and an invisible weapon . . . The second lesson is to make good use of your clothes to achieve your goal . . . [and] increase your own value” (Luoshizi 2013, 77-79). Moreover, women need to “develop your obedient, tender, virtuous, and considerate personality” (Jinfei and Gao 2013, 178). Here, the work of self-care adheres to gender norms that are seen as a form of capital. Gendered subjectivity constituted through performances of gender is instrumentalized to increase competitiveness on the job marketplace.

The “bitch mentality” also leads to the instrumentalization of human relationships, discussed in terms of loyalty and collectivity. Gender plays a role in how loyalty is interpreted. For example, “the Yongzheng emperor is like a CEO in a big corporation, he has to pursue profits for the corporation, but also takes care of all kinds of personal relationships in the corporation” (Wang 2013, 56). This discourse emphasizes the power and benevolence of the male boss and the virtue of femininity as obedience and ambiability – a discourse that encourages women to stay where they are as the subordinate/symbolic concubine of male superiors. Relatedly, for women, there is an emphasis on collectivity and harmony: “It is important to have a collective goal, this is how all parts can be harmonized and collective spirit be maximized” (Wang 2013, 137). However, loyalty as willing self-subordination and harmony to “stay on your boss’s side of the battle” is to “make him feel that you take his side: this will benefit your career” (Wang 2013, 162-164). For men, however, obedience is not emphasized, but rather the ambition to get ahead and into a powerful position: “Loyalty is like a professional skill . . . In the back palace where power struggles are common, you should not let your loyalty hold you back from your promotion . . . Behind all your loyal performances, you should really keep your own interests in mind” (Luo 2013, 184-190).

Conclusion: neoliberalism with Chinese characteristics in Taiwan

This chapter has analyzed present-day political rationalities in Taiwan by means of analyzing the governmental discourses circulating through the TV industry and the textual material generated through this “everyday network of government,” emphasizing their articulations with the project of Taiwan’s neoliberalization through China. As the Taiwanese uptake of Empresses in the Palace makes clear, govern-mentality” in building and developing the culture industry operates through the neoliberal discourse of economization of culture; in particular, the economization of traditional Chinese history and culture which works to the benefit of the pro-KMT, pro-China cross-strait capitalists in Taiwan. At the level of popular culture, we find the economization and commodification of Chinese history in the Zhen Huan-inspired workplace guides which, through a discourse of instrumentalism and materialism, work toward producing selfish, self-responsible and calculating subjects who conform to corporate hierarchy and the spirit of market competition. This subject is gendered to the extent that a woman’s body is instrumentalized to be properly feminine while her mind is trained to stay loyal and obedient to the male boss in order to protect her self-interest. The male worker, in contrast, is encouraged to be ambitious.

The production of this worker subjectivity via Empresses and its para-texts needs to be analyzed within the context of neoliberalization through China in Taiwan, which as I have discussed, helped to consolidate and legitimate the KMT regime (2008-2016), supported by the elite class of the pro-China, cross-strait capitalists. The maintenance of this political and class power was legitimized by the economization of politics, in the sense that political decisions were taken in order to create an environment where the cross-strait capitalists can be structurally supported to achieve and maintain a dominant position. At the same time, history and culture were also economized according to the logic of political power centered in Chineseness. The notion of Chineseness or traditional Chinese culture in Empresses demonstrates a combination of the illiberal, authoritarian hierarchy with the neoliberal market-driven logic of
competition. This subjectivity is conducive to a political-economic order of authoritarian neoliberalism on which Taiwan’s KMT and China’s CCP regimes both relied to maintain their power. This “traditional Chinese culture” emphasizes the “naturalness” of social inequality, with competition being the only means of survival, and encourages human greed and selfishness at the expense of the social collectivity. Competition and individualism promote self-responsibility. The worsening of economic inequality is acknowledged but tolerated as a “natural” state of being, with individuals to blame for not being able to make it. Young people are particularly singled out for their lack of competitive power and their lack of strength and perseverance to put up with low wages and endure, or “eat bitterness” (吃苦). The blaming of individuals at the same time generates more workplace self-help books that teach people to be obedient to the boss, to compete with their co-workers (and see co-workers in the friend-foe structure) in order to advance in the workplace hierarchy. The pursuit of power and profits leads to the instrumentalization of human relationships, which discourages workers from forming unions or collectivities to challenge power inequality. Further, as noted above, this is also a gendered discourse: while male workers are encouraged to pursue their interests and become powerful, women are encouraged to use their beautiful bodies as capital while staying obedient to the boss.

However, the success of governing at a distance through self-regulation cannot be guaranteed. Convergence culture, while following the logic of commercial interests, also allows for the generation of counter-hegemonic material by users who challenge the government’s neoliberal project. The economic inequality brought about by the Chinese model of neoliberal accumulation by dispossession also helped to seed the conditions for the challenge of such unchecked class power. However, the economization of the political sphere, constituted through the neoliberal logic of competition and the friend-foe imaginary, led Taiwan’s former government to see dissenters as threats to be eliminated. As a result, young people who protest against trade with China that cements the cross-strait capitalists’ power were seen as “terrorists” deserving to be treated with violence (as evidenced by the government’s response to the 2014 Sunflower protest movement). Such appeals to violence to maintain class power undermine the democratic principle that glues Taiwan society into a collectivity. As should be clear by now, the project of neoliberalization through China that I have been critiquing throughout this chapter has consequences that far exceed the media realm to have a very direct impact on contemporary politics and society. Indeed, adherence to such a project has led Taiwan into an uncertain present—and future—where its young democracy may stand at stake.

Notes

1 In 2011, the National Communications Commission threatened to revoke the license for ET Drama Channel (Dong Shu Yi Jia Tai) for its violation of the quota for imported dramas by featuring mostly Korean dramas. As a result, many TV channels, including ET Drama Channel, switched to importing Chinese dramas because China is officially considered a “special district,” not a foreign nation.

2 One popular book in this genre is Workplace Winner (1996), written by Chiu Yi, the former legislator and now perpetual political talk show guest both in Taiwan and China.

3 The gendering processes take place in different forms. The cover of Luo Yi’s book, composed of cold office chairs, directs his readership to men mostly. Many of the books, however, have feminine markers such as flowers and an infantilized cartoon character from the show. There are also sections specifically directed at women in these books, such as love and dress codes.

References

The "neoliberalization through China" project in Taiwan


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